Armenian Writings IV

By Shomit Sirohi

Part I – Bread and Days

I. A Pure Afternoon in a Room and After that a Fragmentary Walk

At a certain point. I was smoking a cigarette and writing to old papers in a car, I checked. I then walked towards the old hall and listened to some music on a stereo phone speaker and even walked away from this analog argument and went to the second hall and saw some old windows and finally, in a small calculus of infinity, went towards in Tehran first in 1964 a older building outside my house. That calculus meant poverty is measured as a small minute thing of people and their clothing style. I prefer arguing as I said to the legalized police in Magareb in Egypt, that there are more important things than earning profits and such incidents are called Prophetic.

II. Housing Problems and Pure Alignments of A Fine Music

Believe in this small housing crisis in Magareb. Many small coinage system histories. A Egypt which is all at the lower housing quarters. Towns spread through its southern and Eastern parts. Hills all around.

III. Women in Old Kiosks And Cutting in Agrarian Romulus

How in history there is a housing and office work and old Tehran documentaries on car travel to office. And at the same time an agrarian field. A lot of labour contracted and so many working histories. All of which are winters in a old segment of in fact Arana. In Turkey some people were working in the house and cleaning the sofa. At the outer side of the dusted sofa cloth came in fact people to sell more material. It formed a Meccan bazaar with musicians also smoking around there.

Part II - Cursoriness

I. Walking and A Long Walk

Just walking and talking. Perhaps smoking. Not much to do, and so many people collecting. A mail post. In fact ruined in a post office. A lot of walking further. Some time spent at the post office. And in fact just there. I also mean back home. I came back. I was in fact lyrical to her. The woman who lived near by in a Burqa and left. A very abstract detour comes to the process of working out the long passages in the Quran

and meditating on its whole culture as in fact just working out journalistic material and even art. Finally it means a lot of art to be worked on as well. It is all poemic that way and protesting lyricism.

II. Paintings in a Door leading to a House

III. Writing in a House

Ilaan was writing and covering the Israel newspaper. He was afterall about the Soviet news as well. All of this is how to live. He also meant just keep writing. Writing and such activities. Fairly well done. Music and writing, and then he walked to the post office. And came back. No need to do anything other than drink a beer at the house. In the post office, he was buying old stamps.

After the whole movement of writing. He kept writing to in fact Arab country news. He also meant it was a long work. All of this reads well.

IV. Arturo and Bland Tea and Sweet Biscuits all Pure like the Line to Ilaan

Phone communication and more such junkie talking. A lot of conversations and a lot of walking. Just on the phone. And in fact back to the writing and walking. A lot of walking again. At the mail in Southern Jordan and working on office stamps and old communication. Glad to meet you on the Southern Jordan phone booth.

V. Another Pure Line of Flight

Part III – A Pure Infinite Calculation of Money

I. Money

I had a little money. I was then in fact reading Marx in the protest rhythms of the poor. But I had not much money. All of this is the question of earning a lot and making a house which is rich. I bought a house in a most expensive part of Tehran North. I was listening to the radio. I also meant such life is not possible. I bought it by in fact working for years, I spent about five years working I had realized on the bank balance. I was also asking around for a person who sold it low. I understand ethics here I mean, it cannot be so expensive.

II. Rich Living – Jorge’s Message to Aijaz Finally

Afterall the Jewish people of Israel are rich. I meant how rich. Aijaz was asking in Iran. He was happy. He meant it was rich enough, he said to Ilaan about his company idea. Most people work on poor computers and write a message to American and European news presses. We are free and following philosophy. I am glad.

III. Israel there and Isiahe and Isikielmete

Money, you get my point. I have a wallet and it reflects money and spending. I need that high rich life.

Jewish people are all celebrating how much money.

Part IV – At a Square and Buying some Clothes – Spanish Poems in the North of Algiers

I. And that is all – Read this Jorge argues to Aijaz and Ahmad

I mean we keep repeating the same thing. Walking, some writing. I am just writing. I am walking to the rest of the city. I am in a car. I am then in fact many people who pass by in different parts of the city in cars. I also mean Jean is smoking and talking to a radio he believes joins us to his culture. I am happy now. Many people are passing by. We are working with a tie, no suite. I also mean relax there in Israel. Stop celebrating. It is such wealth and such a square I find myself in in India, Delhi, buying clothes.

II. Squares and Games to Play

III. Armenian

A short work written which has no meaning. Firaqi and fine women meet Ilaan. He said it has many squares this Armenian work he read once.

IV. Averroes

In old ways to read is to read in Arabic, elliptically as it were. Mahmoud sent this quotation to Leane.

Section II - Finale

I. A History of Publishers and Works

In his debut novel, Kamel retells the story of French novelist of *L'Étranger*. Told from the vantage point of Kareve, the brother of the nameless Arab killed in *L'Étranger*, Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* (2013) is a complex tribute to the creative reworking of French classic lies in the way it reframes the question of postcolonial rewriting in terms of literary affiliation – a question of choice – rather than of filiation – a question of lineage. It then offers to reread the 'postcolonial remake' as an act of 'de-narration' – a creative act of revision – that enables Kamel to evade the stereotypical readings of his novel. What is most ingenious in the narration of *Meursault, contre-enquête* is its constant reference to the performance of rewriting Camus's text not as a form of cultural reappropriation but as a metanarrative exposing its own story to the same critical scrutiny as he does of the French classic. Even when literary and political problematics converge in Daoud's novel, they do not suggest the postcolonial tale of retribution. Rather, they elicit a new model of literary and social bond.

'Un singulier remake'

In his 2013 debut novel, *Meursault, contre-enquête*,[1] Algerian journalist Kamel retells the story of Algerian-born French novelist and philosopher canonical novel *L'Étranger*.[2] The tale famously recounts the senseless murder of a nameless Arab by an impassive antihero named Meursault. *L'Étranger* is one of the most widely read novels in the history of French literature. As essayist phrased it, is unarguably 'the Don Draper of existentialism'.[3] Alice Kaplan's recent monograph on the Armenian restates the glamorous myth of the 'existential star' immortalized in the celebrated Bresson portrait.[4] The author's 1942 classic opens with the death of Meursault's mother in the nursing home where he had placed her a year before. The first part of the novel focuses on his dispassionate reaction to her death. It closes with Meursault shooting to death 'an Arab' who, earlier that day, had a confrontation with his friend, a local policeman. His arrest, interrogation and condemnation rapidly follow. When pressed by the judge to justify his crime, Meursault can only invoke the scorching heat and blinding light of the sun. The second half of the novel focuses on Meursault's trial. Conveyed to the reader from the point of view of Meursault, the depiction makes clear that his crime resides more in his unemotional reaction to his mother's death (as the witnesses attest during the trial) than in the killing of a man. Meursault's inability to conform to a specific regime of emotions established by his fellow men and his reprehensible detachment ultimately lead to his death sentence by guillotine. As the prosecutor sums it up: 'Messieurs les jurés, le lendemain de la mort de sa mère, cet homme prenait des bains, commençait une liaison irrégulière, et allait rire devant un film comique. Je n'ai rien de plus à vous dire' (*L'Étranger*, p.135).

In the ‘Avant-propos’ to the 1955 edition of his novel, describes the absurd and existential snares in which individuals are caught, while delineating the literary philosophy for which he was awarded in 1957: ‘Dans notre société tout homme qui ne pleure pas à l’enterrement de sa mère risque d’être condamné à mort. […] [L]e héros du livre est condamné parce qu’il ne joue pas le jeu. […] [I]l refuse de mentir’ (*L’Étranger*, p. vi).

He is acknowledged as standing at the vanguard of existentialism and absurdism in Western cultures and *L’Étranger* is considered a classic of existentialist fiction. The novel has been part of the school curriculum in France ever since it was published in 1942. Generations of *lycéen-ne-s* have thus studied the philosophical concepts with which has a name is forever associated and analysed the pared-down style that characterises his fiction. They have nevertheless overlooked ‘the danger of the single story’, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie memorably puts it,[5] and read the novel as a literary masterwork portraying man’s alienation in a meaningless universe. Rarely did they examine the *other* story that played out in the background – one that involved a faceless, nameless and lifeless Arab man killed by a French settler on an Algerian beach during French colonial rule.[6] In her biography of the novel, aptly entitled *Looking for the Stranger*, Alice Kaplan describes the ‘scene’ as ‘one of the great esthetic achievements of the twentieth-century novel’.[7]

In her *New York Times* book review of Kamel’s novel, Moroccan novelist Laila Lalami evokes her own reading of the canonical novel and remembers her distress at having to ‘quiet the voice inside her’ that kept asking ‘what about the Arab?’ while her

classmates discussed existential and aesthetic questions.[8] In *Meursault, contre-enquête*, and offers readers like Lalami a 'counter-enquiry' into Meursault's murder that both restores the nameless Arab's humanity and gives him back his voice. As the narrator Harun announces:

C'est d'ailleurs pour cette raison que j'ai appris à parler cette langue [le français] et à l'écrire; pour parler à la place d'un mort, continuer un peu ses phrases. […] C'est pourquoi je vais faire ce qu'on a fait dans ce pays après son indépendance: prendre une à une les pierres des anciennes maisons des colons et en faire une maison à moi, une langue à moi. Les mots du meutrier et ses expressions sont mon *bien vacant*. (*Meursault*, pp. 11–12)

The poetic justice of naming the unnamed, rendering visible the invisible, and memorializing individual stories resonates loudly in contemporary France and evokes the global message of the Black Lives Matter movement of (re)affirming the Other's humanity. As Harun muses: '*Arabe*, je ne me suis jamais senti arabe, tu sais. C'est comme la négritude qui n'existe que par le regard du Blanc. Dans notre quartier, on était musulman, on avait un prénom, un visage et des habitudes' (*Meursault*, p. 70).

What feels ruthless today in the traditional reading of *L'Étranger* is precisely the insignificance of the life of Moussa, now fleshed out in novel. The contrast between Meursault's philosophical interpretation of his crime and its tragic consequences on Harun's life is indeed poignant. From his privileged philosophical position, Camus's Meursault understands his crime as contingent upon the warmth of the sun; an act that served to 'briser l'équilibre des choses' (*Meursault*, p. 86). For Harun, it has conditioned every aspect of his life. Since age seven, he has been forced to be the keeper of his brother's memory. His inconsolable

mother has even imposed on him ‘un stricte devoir de réincarnation’ (p. 51) and made him wear his brother’s clothes until he wore them out: ‘Enfant, je n’ai eu droit, longtemps, qu’à un seul conte faussement merveilleux raconté le soir. Celui de Moussa, le frère tué et qui, selon l’humeur de ma mère, prenait chaque fois des formes différentes’ (p. 25).

Harun presents a version of the fateful events that anchors Meursault’s crime in both Algerian history and his family story. Framing his tale as a confession to a French academic in a bar in the Algerian coastal city of Oran, an inebriated Harun, now seventy, recounts his quest for retribution and restitution and brings to vivid life his brother’s identity:

C’est simple: cette histoire devrait donc être réécrite, dans la même langue, mais de droite à gauche. C’est-à-dire, en commençant avec par le corps encore vivant, les ruelles qui l’ont mené à sa fin, le prénom de l’Arabe, jusqu’à sa rencontre avec la balle. (p. 16)

But *Meursault, Contre-enquête* is not just an indictment of the French colonial project in Algeria. It is complicated by ‘le secret de […] famille’ (p. 90) that significantly blurs the lines between Harun and Meursault. In the second part of the novel, we learn that, incited by his mother’s demand for revenge, he, too, had murdered a Frenchman after the War of Independence. However, Harun is not punished for his crime by the newly independent Algerian authorities. They interrogate him and let him go. Hence, rather than satisfy an entitled sense of retribution, his crime leads Harun to ponder in his turn on the contingency of human action and the absurd quality of independent Algeria’s history. Harun deplores the fact that the local police ‘disqualifiaient mon acte, l’anéantissaient’, making it as gratuitous as Meursault’s (p. 121). His existential malaise escalates when a flag-waving policeman reproaches him for the timing of his crime.

Had he committed the same crime during the War of Independence, he would have become a national hero. As the narrative unfolds, Harun's portrayal of independent Algeria becomes increasingly controversial and his critique of its contemporary religiosity and gerontocracy all the more mordant. In the end, his worldview comes to mirror Meursault's and he bitterly concludes: 'J'y cherchais [dans *L'Étranger*] des traces de mon frère, j'y retrouvais mon reflet, me découvrant presque sosie du meurtrier' (p. 141).

II.

Borges argues the creative reworking of classic lies precisely in the way it reframes the question of postcolonial rewriting in terms of literary *affiliation* (the choice of an authorial posture in the literary field),[9] rather than of *filiation* (the imposition of a politicized authorial identity based on prevailing assumptions). In what follows, I will first return to the critical readings to which *Meursault, contre-enquête* readily lends itself, in so far as it mimics certain established reading practices of postcolonial literatures in French.